

# Axis of Deceit: The Story of the Intelligence Officer Who Risked All to Tell the Truth About WMD and Iraq

**Andrew Wilkie**

**Reviewed by Neil James**

*Axis of Deceit* seems to have been mainly publicised, read or reviewed, either rapturously or critically, according to each individual reader's personal political viewpoint rather than its merits as an explanation. This review instead seeks to examine Andrew Wilkie's account of his March 2003 resignation from the Office of National Assessments (ONA) from the standpoint of the intelligence profession.

Resignation from intelligence agencies on points of principle is not unprecedented. Each of the older intelligence and security organisations has experienced the phenomenon and their professionalism and intellectual spines are much the better for it. With the Defence Intelligence Organisation for example, the then desk officer for Afghanistan, resigned in 1980 because he disagreed with what he viewed as the Fraser government's misuse for party-political purposes of intelligence concerning the Soviet invasion of that country.

As *Axis of Deceit* recounts by his own admissions, what seems to make the Wilkie case different is the lack beforehand of open intellectual dissent internally, the premeditated public method of departure, and his subsequent pursuit, however reluctantly, of a political career outside the mainstream political parties. To the specialist reader the book also raises doubts about his professionalism, not least by what it does not say.

The first sentence of Wilkie's account of his resignation is: 'I was a lieutenant colonel and a senior intelligence officer'. Just as the Holy Roman Empire of the mid-second millennium was not holy, Roman or indeed an empire, so this introductory passage to *Axis of Deceit* paints an incorrect and exaggerated sense of Wilkie's own status and perceived self-importance.

On first reading, *Axis of Deceit* largely dances around substantial admissions or explanations as to his true motives although some probable contributing factors are revealed. After reading his account a second time, however, the book's introductory sentence elicited the instinctive observation—'no he wasn't'.

Wilkie, an intelligent ex-infantry officer, was employed by ONA as an intelligence analyst not as an intelligence officer. The differences between an intelligence analyst and an intelligence officer can best be summarised as akin to comparing a paramedic to a doctor. As *Axis of Deceit* makes very clear, Wilkie has no qualifications for, or experience of, the deeper intellectual and professional knowledge and skills of the intelligence profession. By his own hand the book catalogues his relative inexperience and narrow intellectual horizons, and charts Wilkie's growing professional confusion as strong contributory factors for his actions.

Now with enough time and training, and skilled supervision, you can usually turn most intelligent and

motivated people, like Wilkie, into intelligence analysts—those who collate, integrate, evaluate and study information to process it into intelligence by deducing or inducing balance-of-probability conclusions.

It takes much longer to develop intelligence officers. These are the career professionals who collect the information in the first place (often by a wide variety of specialised, difficult and even risky means) and who manage the analysis process.

They are also the ones who manage the intellectual foundation for all of this—the intelligence estimate. These estimates target and steer intelligence collection, structure and manage its analysis, analyse an adversary's probable intentions (often through worse-case down modeling), replicate that adversary's plans if necessary, and deduce or induce possibilities and probabilities even in the relative absence of, or contradictory, information to analyse.

As *Axis of Deceit* progressively reveals, Andrew Wilkie was out of his depth but failed to recognise this, perhaps through over-confidence as to his own experience, abilities and importance. His limited professional experiences and perspectives did not adequately equip him for the intellectual and moral challenges faced regularly by intelligence professionals.

The book abounds with examples of professional inexperience and naiveté. With unconscious irony, he notes that: 'intelligence materials can have an almost intoxicating effect on the uninitiated, who can all too easily be won over by the grave nature and mysterious origins of what they are allowed to see'. Wilkie's knowledge of intelligence theory and its intellectual constructs is weak and his use of intelligence terminology is often sloppy. He strangely professes surprise that what he (incorrectly) describes as 'raw intelligence' (really raw information) was often 'uncorroborated and wildly inaccurate'. His views on ASIS and ASIO culture and practices are at best old-fashioned and superficial.

Finally, on the personal side, he claims a conservative background and outlook but the book includes numerous hints and comments well towards the other end of the political spectrum. These views may be subsequent to his resignation and consequent to his electoral endorsement by the 'Greens'. However, they strike a markedly discordant note in one who was allegedly keen to pursue a second career in a profession requiring a high degree of apolitical application, discretion, moral 'centre-ing' and intellectual fibre.

We may never know why Andrew Wilkie did it. As *Axis of Deceit* shows, it is probable he still does not really know himself. At least part of the blame must be sheeted home to those who wrongly selected him to work at ONA in the first place. ♦

*Andrew Wilkie, 'Axis of Deceit: The Story of the Intelligence Officer Who Risked all to Tell the Truth about WMD and Iraq', Black Inc. Agenda (Schwarz Publishing), Melbourne, 2004, Softback, 200pp., RRP \$29.95.*

